

BRITAIN AND THE SMALL NATIONS:

HER PRINCIPLES
AND HER POLICY

BY

Jyas

SIR EDWARD COOK,

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It is not to be thought of that the Flood
Of British freedom, which, to the open sea
Of the world's praise, from dark antiquity
Hath flowed, "with pomp of waters, unwithstood,"
Roused though it be full often to a mood
Which spurns the check of salutary bands,
That this most famous stream in bogs and sands
Should perish; and to evil and to good
Be lost for ever. In our halls is hung
Armoury of the invincible Knights of old;
We must be free or die, who speak the tongue
That Shakespeare spake; the faith and morals hold
Which Milton held.—In every thing we are sprung
Of Earth's first blood have titles manifold.

Wordsworth.

Printed for the VICTORIA LEAGUE
by WYMAN & SONS, LTD.,
Fetter Lane, London, E.C.

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"Belgium shall form an independent and perpetually neutral State." Such was the pledge to which Germany set her seal, in common with Great Britain, France, and Russia, in the Treaty of London of 1831, and again of 1839 (Article VII.). In 1870, upon the outbreak of war between France and Prussia, Great Britain obtained from each combatant a pledge to respect this Treaty, and on her own side promised to co-operate with either in resisting any violation of Belgium by the other. On July 31st, 1914, Sir Edward Grey, in view of existing treaties, asked both France and Germany "whether they were prepared to engage to respect the neutrality of Belgium as long as no other Power violates it." France at once gave such an engagement. Germany refused; and delivered an ultimatum to Belgium, saying that she would be treated as an enemy unless she consented to the German invasion. Belgium "categorically refused this as a flagrant violation of the Law of Nations," and appealed to Great Britain for support. The British Government repeated its question to Germany, who gave no reply except by the forcible invasion of Belgium. England thereupon declared war.

The Example of Belgium.

"The issue was one," said the Prime Minister in the House of Commons (August 27th), "which no great and self-respecting nation, certainly none bred and nurtured like ourselves in this ancient home of liberty, could, without undying shame, have declined." The German Chancellor, when the British Ambassador told him that England meant to keep her word, asked, "At what price will your compact be kept; has the British Government thought of

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that?" The British Ambassador "hinted to his Excellency as plainly as he could" that it was not the way with Britons to break their word through fear. Neither was it the Belgian way. "Belgium had no interest to serve," continued the Prime Minister, "save and except the one supreme and over-riding interest of every State, great or little, which is worthy of the name—the preservation of her integrity and of her national life. History tells us that the duty of asserting and maintaining that great principle, which is the well-spring of civilisation and of progress, has fallen once and again at the most critical moment in the past to States relatively small in area and in population, but great in courage and resolve—to Athens and Sparta, the Swiss Cantons, and, not least gloriously, three centuries ago, to the Netherlands. Never, I venture to assert, has the duty been more clearly and bravely acknowledged, and never has it been more strenuously and heroically discharged, than during the last weeks by the Belgian King and the Belgian people."

Britain as Champion of Small Nations.

Great Britain could not then have acted otherwise than she did, without forfeiting her honour and good name. But if she had turned a deaf ear to the appeal of Belgium, she would not only have violated a distinct obligation, she would also have abandoned her traditional rôle as a protector of small nations, and have turned her back on some of the most honourable pages in her history—pages consecrated by the words and deeds of commanders, poets, and statesmen, who are among the glories of our race and State.

Remember, for instance, the case of PORTUGAL. By the Treaty of London, 1661, "the King of Great Britain doth profess and declare, with the consent and advice of his Council, that he will take the interest of Portugal and all its dominions to heart, defending the same with his utmost power by sea and land, even as England itself." Think of the Peninsular War, and the lines of Torres Vedras. "I conceive," said Wellington, "that the honour

and interest of our country require that we should hold our ground here as long as possible, and, please God, I will maintain it."

Turn to Central Europe, where the SWISS REPUBLIC is a busy centre of many international offices. Her "independence and perpetual neutrality" were guaranteed by eight Powers at the Congress of Vienna (1814). Strong no less in the valour of her sons than in her mountain barriers, Switzerland is perhaps now safe from violation; but remember, it is to England that, at a critical point in her modern history, she owed in large measure the maintenance of her integrity and independence. In 1846 there were disputes between the Protestant and Roman Catholic cantons; the latter made an attempt at secession, and civil war broke out. Several of the Great Powers proposed to violate the neutrality of Switzerland, and to compel the Swiss by force of arms to adopt the views of the Powers. Lord Palmerston, on behalf of the British Government, stood out—at first alone—against any such interference as might compromise the political independence of the Swiss Confederacy or endanger her position as a home and refuge of liberty on the Continent. He succeeded by skilful and resolute diplomacy in warding off the danger (1847).

The modern kingdom of GREECE, again, may almost be said to owe its existence to Great Britain; and with it are connected one of the most famous of our poets, and one of the most brilliant names of our political body—Byron and George Canning. In the days which preceded the revolutionary war of the Greeks against the Turks, Lord Byron celebrated the history and fate of Greece in imperishable verse; and when the time of deliverance came, he devoted his powers and his life to her service. Byron died in Greece in 1824. In 1825 the Greeks, fighting for their freedom, were sore beset, and "the Greek nation places the sacred deposit of its liberty, independence, and political existence under the absolute protection of Great Britain." Canning, then Foreign Secretary and afterwards for a short time Prime Minister, accepted the trust. By his negotiations with Russia and France, and by the

battle of Navarino (1827), in which the three Powers defeated the Turkish fleet, the kingdom of Greece presently obtained independent existence by international charter.

Then, turn to Northern Europe. There the integrity of NORWAY and SWEDEN was guaranteed by England and France (Treaty of Stockholm, November, 1855). In the case of DENMARK, it was agreed as desirable (1850, 1852) by Austria, Prussia, and Russia, as well as England and France, that "the state of the possessions actually united under the Crown of Denmark should be maintained in its integrity." When in 1863-4 Prussia, with Austrian help, strangely requited at Sadowa, embarked upon the dismemberment of Denmark, Great Britain protested loudly, and only her inability to find an ally prevented her from adding military to diplomatic support against the ruthless crushing of a little State. The Danes have not forgotten. "I need not tell you," wrote a Dane, the other day, "where our sympathies are. It is a question of life and death to England" (*Times*, August 28th).

The Interest of Self-Defence.

It is true that in some (though not all) of the cases briefly recalled above, the interest of England's self-defence was engaged on the same side as her chivalry and honour. In the Peninsular War, as throughout the struggle against Napoleon, England, in opposing and finally in overthrowing the aggressor and the usurper, was fighting for her own safety. And, in the case of Belgium, when Mr. Gladstone took measures for safeguarding her in 1870, he was thinking partly (though not entirely) of the safety of our own country. We have, he said, a deep interest "against the unmeasured aggrandisement of any Power whatever." The same consideration holds good to-day. The possession of Antwerp, said Napoleon, would be "a pistol pointed at England." If Germany, as a result of crushing France and Belgium, secured possession of a coast-line from which she could attack us at short range, the consequences might be only less serious than an invasion of our shores. The present struggle is thus vital to our very existence.

As Sir Edward Grey said in the House of Commons (August 3rd), "If France were beaten to her knees, if Belgium fell under the same dominating influence, and then Holland and then Denmark, would not Mr. Gladstone's words come true, that just opposite to us there would be the unmeasured aggrandisement of a single Power."

The Principles Involved.

The independence of many of the smaller nations is thus an interest of British self-defence; but the principles for which Great Britain has stood in the past and stands to-day are vital no less to the highest interests of peace and civilisation. Those principles are that international treaties are something more than mere "scraps of paper"; that they are binding on the strong, no less than on the weak; that, as Mr. Asquith said in the House of Commons (August 6th), "small nationalities are not to be crushed, in defiance of international good faith, by the arbitrary will of a strong and an over-mastering Power." The smaller nations, no less than the larger, have a distinctive part to play in the world. "Nationality," said Mazzini, "ought to be to humanity that which the division of labour is in a workshop—the recognised symbol of association; the assertion of the individuality of a human group called by its geographical position, its traditions, and its language to fulfil a special function in the European work of civilisation." On the maintenance of these principles depends every hope of saving the world from the rule of mere brute force and militarism.

The German Government's Action.

The German Government—by their deeds in Belgium and by the words of the Imperial Chancellor and the Foreign Secretary—have proclaimed another creed. They have declared and shown, as their principles of action, that treaties are "just scraps of paper"; that a pledge to respect a little nation's "neutrality" is "just a word"; that international obligations may be violated at will by a stronger

nation against a weaker; that military necessity knows no law; that international law is not binding; that a powerful military State, engaged in a war of aggression, is entitled to "hack its way through" a small nation, whose neutrality it had bound itself to respect; that it may pillage and plunder any such nation which presumes to defend itself. In short, that there is no Right but Might. It is against these doctrines that Great Britain, with the aid of her self-governing Dominions beyond the seas, is making war.

The British Ideal.

"Certain it is," wrote a great English statesman at the time of the Franco-Prussian War of 1870, "that a new Law of Nations is gradually taking hold of the mind of the world; a law which recognises independence, which frowns upon aggression, which favours the pacific, not the bloody settlement of disputes, which aims at permanent and not temporary adjustments; above all, which recognises, as a tribunal of paramount authority, the general judgment of civilised mankind. It has censured the aggression of France; it will censure, if need arises, the greed of Germany. The greatest triumph of our time will be the enthronement of this idea of public right as the governing idea of European policy; as the common and precious inheritance of all lands" (Mr. Gladstone). It is for the triumph of these ideals that Great Britain is fighting.

The war is a life and death struggle for her own free existence. It is a life and death struggle also for the free existence of the smaller nations throughout the world.

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